

GULF WOMEN

Edited by
Amira El-Azhary Sonbol



دار بلومزبري - مؤسسة قطر للنشر
B L O O M S B U R Y
Q A T A R F O U N D A T I O N
P U B L I S H I N G



الأساس
Qatar Foundation

First published in 2012 by

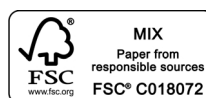
Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing
Qatar Foundation
Villa 3, Education City
PO Box 5825
Doha, Qatar
www.bqfp.com.qa

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Chapters 9 and 10 translated with the assistance of Azza El Kholy

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ISBN 9789992142684

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Typeset by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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I. *Women in Eastern Arabia: Myth and Representation*

HATOON AJWAD AL-FASSI

This chapter explores the history of eastern Arabia, looking for traces of women, goddesses, priestesses, *kahinat*, in fact, any female representation. It finds that there are few such traces, but that those that exist, however scarce, are very interesting and telling. Three distinct periods can be identified with regard to women's history in ancient Arabia. First, mythical woman, up to the third millennium BCE; second, historical eastern woman, from the end of the first century BCE; and third, Arabian woman, with evidence from a few decades before the Prophet as part of the survivals of the two ages of pre-Islamic and Islamic—the group of people who are known as *al-mukhadramun*.

Introduction

The history of ancient Arabia is full of gaps that continually stimulate the researcher. When one comes to women's history, the sources are even sparser and eastern Arabia is no exception.¹ Arabian women's footprints

¹Eastern Arabia has been known under various names. One is Bahrain, which includes the western coast of the Gulf between today's Basra and Oman. Some believe that this was the capital of Hajar, while others hold that Hajar was the capital of Bahrain, which included a large area of land and water (Yaqut 1: 23), and the modern Bahrain. It extends westwards to the region of Yamama. Yaqut adds to it al-Khat, Qatif, al-Ara, Hajar, Baynuna, al-Zara, Juwatha, al-Sabur, Darin, and al-Ghaba. The capital of Hajar was al-Safa and al-Mushaqqar (Yaqut 1: 232). This description belongs to the Islamic period

have rarely made their mark. However, it is a historian's task and duty to look for them. Eastern Arabia was a dynamic actor in the making of ancient history as early as the sixth millennium BCE, with stone-age findings of fishermen's and hunters' tools along the west coast, particularly in the Neolithic sites on the Qatar peninsula.² In the fourth and early third millennium BCE the material diminishes. One possible explanation is that there was a rise in sea level which led to a transgression that left land two or three meters below sea level. There is evidence that this took place at the beginning of the third millennium BCE (Inizan 173; Potts, 'Eastern Arabia', 124). The historical periods from which we have written records are not very clear in Arabia. Although the Arabian Peninsula's neighbors, the Sumerians, were the inventors of the first attempts at writing, it is not clear what type of writing the people of eastern Arabia used and there is no evidence from before the third century BCE, when we find *musnad*/South Arabian and Aramaic scripts.

The Arabian Gulf, called the 'lower sea' or the 'bitter sea' in the Sumerian records (fourth to third millennium BCE) was the main influence on the history of the people who lived on its western, eastern, and northern coasts. It was the artery that connected eastern Arabia to Sumeria in the north, Iran in the east, and Melluha (Monehjo-Daro and Harappa)—later India—in the south-east, and the inhabitants navigated up and down its waters, trading in everything, particularly myrrh, frankincense, copper, wood, precious stones, dates, pearls, horses, and other commodities that they either produced or imported and exported.

One of the principal sources in which women are presented in the history of eastern Arabia is the myths of Mesopotamia: Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. They date back to the third millennium BCE onward and a number of these mythological texts refer to Arabia and specifically to parts of eastern Arabia. The most popular and most researched of them all is Dilmun, a civilization and kingdom that flourished in eastern Arabia and today's Bahrain for about 2,000 years. It was first mentioned in mythology of the third millennium as a legendary

and probably the late pre-Islamic period, but not all these towns have been identified. More details below.

²Most of Qatar's Neolithic archaeological findings come from Khor, in the east of Qatar, which date back to the sixth, fifth and later fourth millennia BCE and are found in over 122 sites in the Peninsula alone (Bibby and Kapel 20). For more details, see Potts, *The Arabian Gulf*, 1:28 ff.

land, but then became a real kingdom almost 1,000 years later, with fleets and trade and kings. It was an important middle power between the Indus valley in the east and southern Mesopotamia in the north and also played an intermediate role with Magan—modern Oman. The first reference to Dilmun and its contact with southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) comes from the Warka (Uruk) period (in Sumer, southern Iraq), i.e. at the dawn of writing, and the central Gulf, at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, around 3200 BCE, where we find the bird-like sign that indicates Dilmun (al-Thani 54). Dilmun then was not limited to the Bahrain of today; it is believed the name referred to the area from present-day Kuwait up to the Strait of Hormuz, and had many coastal centers including Failaka, Tarut, Umm Annar and others (al-Badr, *Mantiqat al-Khaleej al-'Arabi khilal al-'alfayn al-thani wa al-'awal qabl al-milad*, 112).

The island of Bahrain possibly acted as the main center or capital of the state; however, this must have been changeable and the capital would have moved during different phases of history along the western coast of the Gulf.

The reference to Dilmun mentions Umm Annar, in the present-day United Arab Emirates, which was a port for the Magan settlements in inland south-eastern Arabia. Those contacts continued throughout later periods, as is proven by evidence of similar rituals, parallel temple architecture (compare the Barbar temple in Bahrain and the Ninjersu temple in southern Iraq dating to around 2093–2072 BCE (al-Safadi 221), the trade in Dilmuni pearls (al-Badr, *Mantiqat al-Khaleej al-'Arabi khilal al-'alfayn al-rabi' wa al-thalith qabl al-milad*, 141), evidence of Dilmuni ships taking timber to Ur around the mid-third millennium BCE (Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 441; Speece 167) and bringing copper from Magan in exchange for wheat, barley, oil, textiles, cedar wood, and silver (al-Ahmad 269).

Dilmun's relationships with the outside world crossed Sumeria and extended to Syria—some of the items reported to originate from the Lebanese mountains included cedar wood, which was imported by the Sumerians—and Dilmuni influence also extended there. For example, the name 'Dilmun' was given to certain weights that were particularly used in the Ebla weighing system for silver and gold.³

³Ebla was a great civilization in northern Syria, dating from the time of Saragon the Akkadian (2340 BCE). It extended from Emesa in the west, beyond the Euphrates to the north and up to Urfa (Arki 143–4; al-Bunni 7).

Women in mythical eastern Arabia: The Sumerian epics

The mythological Dilmun is referred to in many Sumerian epics. The reading of these texts has shown that Dilmun was portrayed as the Promised Land or the Garden of Eden,⁴ the paradise where there is no fear or sorrow, no death or lamentation. It was the land of eternity and immortality. The representation of females in the myths is very strong and telling, even though most of them are goddesses. The world of mythology is full of very vivid signs and symbols that reflect to a certain extent the relationships that existed in the society 'when things began'. It may be suggested that the story of how eastern Arabia (Dilmun) was constructed, with its relationships and images of men and women, during the fourth millennium BCE has much to say about the formation of the history and identity of the people of eastern Arabia. Myths and beliefs have always been important to social structure, as they create relations, identities, and powers and re-define them throughout time. The texts clearly reveal the density of presence, leadership, and the centrality of women in the formation of these myths. The most direct description of the Garden of Eden is found in the myth of Enki and Ninhursag.⁵

Myth of 'Enki and Ninhursag': Paradise myth

This legend is set in legendary Dilmun, a land of sunrise, purity and cleanliness, a land that does not know death or sickness—but that is without water. The water god Enki orders the sun god, Utu, to fill Dilmun with clean water springing from the heart of the earth and this is how Dilmun became a green garden of the gods.⁶ In this paradise, the earth and fertility goddess Ninhursag ordered eight kinds of plants to grow and blossom after a complex story of her conceiving from the god Enki and giving birth

⁴See the parallel in McKenzie 322.

⁵'Ninhursag' means 'queen and mistress of the hursag', i.e. the foothills. She is identified with the mother-goddess (Frymer-Kensky 15).

⁶It is interesting to note that the issue of water was fundamental. The mythology emphasizes that Dilmun lacks water; however, it also provides a mythical explanation for the abundance of later water in an area famous for its springs. Bahrain is known for its dual flow of both sweet and salt water, with the sweet water flowing in the midst of the salt water of the Gulf. Hasa alone is known to have over 162 springs, not to mention other towns such as al-Qatif and al-Uqair (see al-Badr, *Mantiqat al-Khaleej al-'Arabi khilal al-'alfayn al-rabi' wa al-thalith qabl al-milad*, 111).

in nine days without pain. The paradise myth ends by assigning lords and deities to each part of the body and each important land of the time. Dilmun was given to Enshagag (the lord of Dilmun?). The poem goes like this:

The land Dilmun is a pure place, the land Dilmun is a clean place,
 The land Dilmun is a clean place, the land Dilmun is a bright place;
 He who is all alone laid himself down in Dilmun,
 The place, after Enki had laid himself by his wife,
 That place is clean, that place is bright;
 He who is all alone laid himself down in Dilmun,
 The place, after Enki had laid himself by Ninsikil,
 That place is clean, that place is bright.
 In Dilmun the raven uttered no cries,
 The kite uttered not the cry of kite,
 The lion killed not,
 The wolf snatched not the lamb,
 Unknown was the kid-killing dog,
 Unknown was the grain-devouring boar,
 The bird on high . . .⁷ not its young,
 The dove . . . not the head,
 The sick-eyed says not 'I am sick-eyed,'
 The sick-headed says not 'I am sick-headed,'
 Its [Dilmun's] old woman says not 'I am an old woman,'
 Its old man says not 'I am an old man,'
 Its unwashed maid is not . . . in the city,
 He who crosses the river utters no . . . ,
 The overseer does not . . . ,
 The singer utters no wail,
 By the side of the city he utters no lament.
 Her city drinks the water of abundance,
 Dilmun drinks the water of abundance,
 Her wells of bitter water, behold they are become wells of good water,
 Her fields and farms produced crops and grain,
 Her city, behold it is become the house of the banks and quays of the
 land,

⁷. . . in this translation indicates that the tablet is broken at this point.

Dilmun, behold it is become the house of the banks and quays of the
land

.....

For the little ones to which I gave birth . . .

Let Abu be the king of the plants,

Let Nintul be the lord of Magan,

Let Ninsutu marry Ninazu,

Let Ninkasi be [the goddess who] sates the heart,

Let Nazi marry Nindar,

Let Dazimua marry Nigishzida,

Let Ninti be the queen of the month,

Let Enshagag be the lord of Dilmun.

O Father Enki, praise! (Trans. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 82–6)

The Deluge myth

As for the Sumerian Deluge myth, Ziusudra, the king who plays the role equivalent to that of Noah in the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Qur'an, saves the population of his town Eridu. At the end of the epic, he prostrates himself before the gods Anu and Enlil, who give him the 'Breath eternal like that of a god'. The surviving tablet ends with the following verses:

In the land of *crossing*,

The land of Dilmun,

The place where the sun rises,

They [probably Anu and Enlil] caused to dwell.

[The 39 lines that followed have been destroyed.] (Kramer, cited in
Pritchard I: 30)

Myth of 'Enki and the world order'

According to Kramer, this myth is one of the Sumerian story poems, and one of the best preserved. Its tablets were found in the Nippur excavations (Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 233). It comprises 466 verses, 372 of them complete. It starts with an invocation to the god Enki as a deity who rules the world and has control over the fertility of the land and of human beings.

Enki then describes himself and his relationships with the other high gods, including Anu, Enlil, and Ninhursag, and praises himself. He also describes his temple, Enzu, which is built at Eridu, and his journey, during which Dilmun, Magan, and Melluha send him boats full of gifts to receive Enlil's blessings. The story ends with a declaration of allegiance to Enki as the supreme god who has the principal divine responsibilities (*ibid.* 280; al-Ahmad 371–2).

The text of this myth refers to the land of Magan and Dilmun as fertile lands. It is possible that the Deluge myth refers to an ethnic historical movement—perhaps to the arrival of the Sumerians in Dilmun after the deluge, and the legitimization of their rule through the description in the myth of the gods enthroning King Ziusudra in Dilmun.

According to Lamberg-Karlovsky, Dilmun was not only the place where immortalized humans were carried for 'breath eternal', but also 'the paradise land to which a significant portion of the Greater Mesopotamian population, including the populations of northern Arabia, came to be buried in order to enter the underworld (the immortal life of the Paradise Land). Only that can explain the over 170,000 tumuli-tombs of Dilmun found in Bahrain, Yabrin and Dhahran' (46–9). Lamberg-Karlovsky's theory is supported by many other researchers; however, it has also been suggested that Dilmun may be extended to include eastern Arabia. In recent decades hundreds of tombs and tumuli have been found in Dhahran and over 200,000 tombs in an area of ten square kilometers in 'Ayn Jawan in the eastern province of today's Saudi Arabia (Zarins et al. 25–6).

Of interest, are the images found on Dilmuni round seals. One common image is of a seated woman drinking from a bottle with a man facing her (see al-Sindi, photo 18, plate I), although Khalid al-Sindi thinks that this seal shows two males, either gods or kings. It seems very strange that, according to archaeologists and analysts such as al-Sindi, there are no seals that definitely depict women, although it is noted that there are many seals in his collection that may possibly represent women, in addition to fertility scenes, which occur in abundance (e.g. *ibid.*, seals 221–6). The seal referred to above shows the seated person with a lock of hair twisted upward in a style usually associated with women. It is therefore very likely that this seal represents a female, either a goddess or a queen, and a slight pointing at the breast and the narrow waist confirm this. This seal is dated late (i.e. between 2000 and 1600 BCE). However, al-Sindi says elsewhere

that the libation scenes consist of either two men or a man and a woman sitting facing each other and sucking tubes or drinking together from goblets while servants wait on them, scenes that probably commemorate the New Year (e.g. *ibid.*, seals 10, 11, 13; photo 20). Seals also represent mythological scenes—drinking from the spring of life, sharing life and perhaps love. It is not certain whether these images were of earthly beings or heavenly ones.

The spring of life drinking scenes show a high level of representation, in which the woman as a goddess or queen is seated celebrating the New Year with a man, who is lower in status, and who may therefore be either her vizier or a high priest. Apart from these cases, however, women are not commonly represented in Dilmuni seals. In Failaka, in the north of the Gulf, which was part of the Dilmuni civilization, the Danish Exploration Expedition excavated three sites between 1958 and 1963,⁸ and unearthed 427 seals, none of which represented a female, either divine or human, apart from one erotic scene with a nude woman (seal 269). Although this expedition's results do not represent the whole range of Dilmuni seals, the number is significant, as is the absence of women. It indicates that the society was mainly patriarchal, with rare exceptions.

In the centuries that followed, little is known about women except for their assumed normative participation in child-rearing and running the family. No mention is found of women independently, or indeed of men as ordinary individuals. Later, in the final centuries BCE, there are some funerary inscriptions that refer to women on tombs that bear matrilinear inscriptions referring to the interred; these are discussed below.

Women in historical eastern Arabia

From the ninth century BCE onwards scanty references to Dilmun and Magan appear in the royal texts of the Assyrian Empire. The texts refer to an ongoing economic relationship with the Gulf or the Bitter Sea and also imply that Dilmun and Melluha were under Assyrian rule from the time of Tukulti-Ninurta II (891–884 BCE), whose titles included 'King of Dilmun' (al-Badr, *Mantiqat al-Khaleej al-'Arabi khilal al-'alfayn al-thani wa al-'awal qabl al-milad*, 94–5). At that time and up to the sixth century

⁸The report on the seals was not published until 1983; see Kjaerum, *The Stamp and Cylinder Seals, Failaka/Dilmun*.

BCE, Dilmun seems to have been a semi-free state more or less under the tutelage of the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, but the kingdom was not as famous as before and does not seem to have played a significant role in the Gulf trade (Boucharlat and Salles 74).

Another part of ancient Dilmun emerged in eastern Arabia in the form of cities such as Gerrha, which was a mysterious eastern Arabian kingdom that was at its most advanced in the fourth century BCE. It is still debated whether it was located at Thaj, al-'Uqayr, al-Hufuf (Groom 97), Qaryat al-Faw (al-Ansary) or the salt mine site (Lombard). On the basis of a variety of evidence, mainly Strabo's (d. 24 CE) accounts and some inscriptions, some scholars argue that the Nabataeans originated from eastern Arabia and had some contact with the Gerrhaeans (Milik 264–5). One may add to this some references in the early Islamic sources to Nabataeans who lived in Hajar and then moved elsewhere (see below). This is a plausible view because there is as much evidence for it as there is for other parts of Arabia as the origin of their tribe or group of tribes.

During the first century BCE Gerrha was referred to as a prosperous city and its people, like the Sabaeans, as the richest of all. About their houses, Strabo says: 'They have a vast equipment of both gold and silver articles, such as couches and tripods and bowls, together with drinking-vessels and very costly houses; for doors and walls and ceilings are variegated with ivory and gold and silver set with precious stones' (Strabo 16.4.19). This legendary city-state was renowned for trade in aromatics and spices that came from India to Arabia (Strabo 16.4.18). As for the Gerrhaeans, their caravans reached southern Arabia and it took them only forty days to reach Hadramaut (Strabo 16.4.4). Strabo calls it a 'city', situated 2,400 stadia, i.e. 426.24 km (1 stadion = 177.6 m), from the head of the Gulf, and inhabited by Chaldaeans, exiles from Babylon. The extra details he gives are interesting: 'The soil contains salt and the people live in houses made of salt; and since flakes of salt continually scale off, owing to the scorching heat of the rays of the sun, and fall away, the people frequently sprinkle the houses with water and thus keep the walls firm' (Strabo 16.3.2–4). The fame of Gerrha made it tempting for neighboring powers. The Seleucids tried to conquer it many times, but in vain. In 205 BCE Antiochus III agreed to let the Gerrhaeans buy their freedom, beliefs and peace in return for a large sum of money, frankincense and myrrh (Polybius 13.2.4–5).

To the south of Gerrha there was another kingdom called Omana (or

Suhar or Maka-Makai) on the peninsula of present-day Oman, connecting the Gulf with the coast of southern Arabia. It was an important port that had significant relationships with Persia, Karmenia, and northern and southwestern parts of India, from the fifth century BCE (Bin Serai, 'Ancient Inhabitants', 43, 59). Daniel Potts argues that the present town of al-Dur, which witnessed minting, is in fact Omana ('Eastern Arabia', 155). It is situated fifty kilometers west of the Gulf of Oman. In addition to Omana, there is another town, now called Muleiha, eighty kilometers from al-Dur, south of al-Quwein emirate, which flourished in the third century CE, while the surrounding areas date back to Islamic times (Boucharlat and Salles 7).

The memory of the mythical past seems to permeate the ensuing centuries. For example, the second and first centuries BCE yield some social and religious information. Frequent references to a matrilinear system have been found in al-Muleiha, al-Ahsa, and Thaj in eastern Arabia. Tombstone inscriptions in the Hasaeen version of south Arabian script show a number of women using a matrilinear system when referring to themselves or their descendants. In addition, female fertility figurines also occur frequently, especially on the site at Thaj. We need here to define what we mean by matrilinearity, and what the Hasaeen inscriptions are.

Matrilinearity involves, first, tracing descent through the mother rather than the father; second, associating descent with matrilineal residence, in which the husband goes to the place of the woman's family or tribe in what is also known as the 'postmarital residence'; third, the authority within the family belongs primarily to a male representative of the wife's kin (Maciver and Page 248); and fourth, inheritance follows the female line (Stone 32). It is important, however, to distinguish matrilinearity from matriarchy. Anthropologists have dismissed the theory of the existence of a matriarchal society where women are the dominant sex, have control over society and religion, have a matrilinear descent system and are the major providers.

Since the majority of the genealogies given in Hasaeen inscriptions are patrilinear, it can be accepted that this was the prevailing system used by the eastern Arabian population. However, this does not exclude the possibility that other types of system existed. Since some matrilinear genealogies have been found, it can be assumed that matrilinearity might also have been used in certain cases within a predominantly patrilinear society without contradicting the norm, which would explain the incidences of matrilinearity in Hasaeen inscriptions.

Putting eastern Arabian society into context, the first cases of matrilinearity in Arabia were mainly among the royal families of northern Arabia. It then spread, I would argue, from the royal house to the elite and people who belonged to that class, such as priestesses. Examples can be found within the Nabataean dynasty, probably in the exogamic marriages of its women (see al-Fassi 56ff.).

In addition to the textual evidence, there is the archaeological. The regular finding in various parts of the ancient world, including eastern Arabia, of terracotta figurines of women with exaggerated fertility parts, such as the breasts, belly and thighs, is significant. It is argued that these figurines do not represent goddesses but were used in fertility rituals, and many other functions are possible (Pomeroy 14).

Probably the main question here is: did the eastern Arabians follow the matrilinear system? Did they have a mother goddess in their pantheon? Did they follow the Sumerian and Akkadian mythological and religious system or they did they have their own? How did this affect the status of women in their society?

In answering these questions we might say that the eastern Arabians, as represented in the Hasaeans inscriptions of the third century BCE, did not in general follow the matrilinear system, as the majority of the inscriptions indicate a patrilinear system. There is a question mark as regards the few inscriptions referred to above and we shall now try to investigate this.

The Hasaeans

The history of the Hasaeans is imbedded in the history of eastern Arabian settlements, people and states. Probably the most important site in inland eastern Arabia is Thaj, which is considered the main settlement and largest walled city site in eastern Arabia in terms of size—just over a million square kilometers—in the period between the third century BCE and the third century CE. The history of this period is not very clear, but many coins, shards, inscriptions, and tombs have been found at the site (Boucharlat and Salles 78; Potts, *Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, 43–4; al-Zahrani 45).

Numerous sites that are not mentioned in any of the ancient records nevertheless produce very important archaeological findings and such

sites extend from the north to the south of eastern Arabia. In addition to Thaj, there are ‘Ayn Jawan, Tarut, al-Hufuf, al-‘Uqayr, al-Dur, Muleiha, and others. They seem to have formed a sort of cultural unity, which can be observed in their language, script, art, religion, and probably also their ethnicity. By the time of the Greek invasion of Mesopotamia in the fourth century BCE, Dilmun was known as Tylus (Arrian 7.20.6) and there are also references to some of the island’s inland towns, such as Barbar and the Qal‘at.

What concerns us here is the sociological structure of the area, which was without doubt in contact with the rest of the Arabian Peninsula via the land and sea trade and caravan routes that provided one of the main sources of activity for the inhabitants of Arabia. Most studies try to address the issue of the identity of the Arabian Peninsula’s people, their language, deities, writings, trade, agriculture, fishing, and the relationship between the members of society in general and between its men and women in particular—very difficult questions when we are discussing a period 2,000–3,000 years ago.

For our purposes, what is interesting in the findings from Hasaeen history are the inscriptions (in Hasaitic, a modification of South Arabian script). Two remarkable characteristics of these inscriptions are the high proportion of epitaphs commemorating women, and the reference to a matrilinear system of lineage in at least a couple of the inscriptions. Out of sixteen tomb inscriptions found in Thaj, eight belong to women, and out of fifteen found outside Thaj, six belong to women. This is remarkable, taking into consideration the limited number of Hasaeen inscriptions found so far, compared, for example, with the massive archive of south Arabian inscriptions.

Of the inscriptions commemorating women, three give a matrilinear lineage. The first is on a tombstone, probably from Thaj, discovered by an amateur archaeologist. It was published in the 1982 volume of *Atlat: the Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology*, and may be read as follows:

Inscription I

Tombstone and grave
of ghudhayat, daughter

of malikat,
daughter of shabam,
daughter of ahthat,
she of the people
yanukh el.

(Anonymous 139, Pl. 124a; Gazdar et.al.
88, Inscription 16) (Pl. II)

The anonymous commentary in *Atlal* says that Aramaic inscriptions from north-western Arabia tend to give women matronymics (Anonymous 140). In 1986 Jacques Ryckmans wrote a long article about this inscription in which he notes (407) that it is of particular interest in that it presents a matrilinearity going back to the third generation. It is the longest of the matrilinear inscriptions so far found in Arabia, and has particular significance in the discussion about the importance of ‘matrilinear system of filiation’ in pre-Islamic Arabia. However, two more inscriptions were found later in the area of Thaj or al-Hanat that present a matrilinear system of filiation.

Inscription 2

This inscription goes back to the second generation and of an uncertain provenance of eastern Arabia. It reads as follows:

Grave and tomb
of Karly, daughter
of Garat, daughter
of . . . she of
the tribe . . .

(Gazdar et al. 91, No. 4; no image
provided in the anonymous *Atlal* article)

Inscription 3

Found in Abqaiq, this is an incomplete inscription, but the main reference to a daughter is very clear. It reads as follows:

Tomb and grave
 . . . son of
 . . . daughter of
 . . . he of
 the tribe. . .

(Gazdar et al. 91, No. 7)

Although the inscription is damaged and the words cannot be clearly deciphered, the word 'daughter of' is clear and, curiously enough, comes in the second generation after a male is referred to in the first; i.e., a matrilinearity occurs in the second generation, following a patrilineal reference.

Before addressing the question of the significance of these inscriptions, we shall note some cultural points that may be related to these inscriptions.

The figurines

In the ten excavation seasons undertaken in Thaj by the Saudi Arabian Department of Antiquities up to the present, following on from the quick surveys conducted by amateurs since the beginning of the twentieth century, the main findings were terracotta figurines of naked females with a clear emphasis on fertility indicated by the exaggeration of parts such as the breasts and hips. The potter always tries to focus on the area below the belly, in a way that, according to Bibby and Kapel (18), is characteristic of representations of fertility deities as known, for example, among the Greeks. However, they are in fact more similar in appearance to Anatolian and Mesopotamian fertility figurines, although the latter belong to a much earlier date (fourth millennium BCE) (Pl. III). In one season, twenty figurines were found, all of them representing female figures in a squatting position. The nose is of a particular form, and the eyes are mostly unsymmetrical and sometimes more rolled. In some examples, the hands bend to support the breasts, exemplifying the mother goddess. Some of these figurines are decorated with necklaces or belts around the waist. Male figurines were rarely found, but there were numerous camel figurines, and small, square incense burners all made of the same type of mud (Bibby and Kapel 18). Some figurines were found in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula similar to the Thaj figurines in terms of material, form and some other artistic characteristics (al-Zahrani 139–40).

The remaining questions are: what are these figurines, whom do they represent, what role did they play in religion and in society, and is there a link between them and the inscriptions referred to above?

The main feature of these figurines is that they mostly represent women, mainly naked and with exaggerated sexual parts (Pl. IV). Most of the figurines are not complete; usually the head is missing (al-Zahrani 96–9). Many scholars have stressed the religious function of these figurines. Bibby and Kapel suggest that they ‘represent a goddess widely worshiped in Thaj, and that probably each house had a shrine group consisting of a figure of the goddess, one or more camels, and an incense burner’ (18). It has also been suggested that these figurines were used in human and agricultural fertility rituals and to facilitate giving birth (Gazdar et al. 72). Figurines are found in many cultures and might mean many different things, possibly representing their deities or the animals and birds related to their mythological legends. Some of the figurines were also produced as representing mother goddesses, or figures to scare away strangers, or being used as good luck amulets, healing votive offerings, or simply children’s dolls (Hashim 13–14). The abundance of camel figurines also suggests that they had some kind of a ritual importance in either a fertility cult or the worship of a mother goddess in Thaj and its environs. Did the camel figurine represent the god of the caravans, and might it have any relationship to the mother goddess or the fertility goddess?

What I suggest is that these figurines were used as fertility amulets and good luck charms for houses in general and women in particular. They would be related to the special role taken by the female deity in the religious rituals of ancient eastern Arabians, which were presided over by special priestesses responsible for female needs. By following a matrilinear system of filiation, these priestesses followed a distinct custom that distinguished them from the rest of society. It is not clear how much power the priestesses had or to what extent the cult of the female figurines represented a powerful goddess or an advance in women’s status in society.

Women in Islamic eastern Arabia

The Islamic period is usually better documented, as we enter a literate period with Arabic established as the script and the language of almost the whole of Arabia. In the east, where we had Dilmun and Magan, the same

geographical locations are known as Hajar/Bahrain and Oman in the Islamic period. Just as Dilmun could mean the whole western coast of the Gulf, so it was with the new terms. Hajar, whose identity is confused in many geography books between the region and the city, and with Bahrain which is the name given to the whole of the eastern coast of Arabia in the sixth to seventh centuries CE. Many have addressed the question of how to identify the true location of Hajar or to determine how it differed from Bahrain.⁹ I shall refer directly to al-Janbi's findings on the identity of Hajar and its location (al-Janbi 187–238). He has carried out linguistic and geographic field work and literary investigations that have made it possible for him to identify the north-western part of al-Shab'an Mountain (al-Qara) as the location of the great walled city, and to identify its castle and main towns as al-Mushaqqar and al-Safa.¹⁰ This region, Bahrain and Hajar, was under the Manathira of Hira (Iraq) at the dawn of Islam (al-Mulla 2: 30).

Women appear less infrequently in history, but seem stronger in the background, an image that continued in myth as well as in documented history. For example, according to al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418 CE), the Hajar region and town is said in early Islamic sources to have been named after a woman called Hajar, daughter of al-Mukannaf who is reputed to have built it (al-Qalqashandi 5: 52) We have no information about this woman or her identity apart from her name. It seems that this is a remnant of an older tradition of female affiliation to cities as protector goddesses, priestesses or queens.

Dawn of Islam's priestesses

Tradition connects the later settlers in pre-Islamic times with women of influence. For instance, al-Zarqa, daughter of Zuhayr was a *kahina* (shaman/sage) of Quda'a who prophesied where her tribe should settle

⁹For a detailed discussion see Bin Serai, *Cultural Relationship*, 52; al-Janbi 232–7; al-Mulla 1:156–8 and others.

¹⁰Hajar was destroyed by the Qaramita in the fourth century AH/eleventh century CE and Abu Tahir al-Qurmuti built a new town nearby and called it al-Hassa in 314 AH/926 CE (Ibn Khaldun 7:189). However, the name of Hajar lingered as a name for the whole region and al-Hassa then also gave its name to the region in the same way. Bahrain is also a name that many geographers have given to eastern Arabia; some include in Bahrain seven main cities and the island of Awal, including Hajar, Qatif, al-Mushaqqar, al-Khatt, al-Zara, and al-'Uqayr, while others include Juwatha and Darin (al-Ja'fari 26–7).

after losing some battles against the tribe of Nizar, predicting that they would live in Hajar and prosper there. Her people followed her advice, left Tihama on the west coast of Arabia, and moved eastwards to Hajar, in the direction of Bahrain, where they overcame the Nabataeans, who were there, according to the story, and took control. Then, according to Ibn Khaldun (d. 1405 CE), she received another prophecy in rhyme, that they would live in Hajar until a crow cried in a certain way, which would be a sign for them to move to Hira in southern Iraq (Ibn Khaldun 2: 288; al-Asfahani 13: 87). Her tribe trusted in her and believed in her wisdom. It was probably wise advice, since the direction of their migration was in line with the fertile and productive land, in both eastern Arabia and Iraq.

Elsewhere, we find the origin of the term the ‘Alliance of Tanukh’ tribes of eastern Arabia at the dawn of Islam: this same *kahina*, al-Zarqa, referred in her rhyming prophecy to the place where her tribe would settle as Tanukh; they then became known as the Tanukh tribes and entered into an alliance of various tribes who joined together in order to move to Iraq. A group of them continued to Hira and ruled it, and others stayed in Bahrain and Hajar (Ibn Khaldun 2: 288). This *kahina* had an interesting career, giving prophecies that came to pass each time that were obeyed. What is remarkable is the level of trust that the Arabs gave women, especially with regard to supernatural powers of this kind. Her name poses some questions as to whether it was a proper name or a title related to the color blue. According to the dictionary *Lisan al-‘Arab*, the word *zaraqqa* means to have either blue eyes, strong eyesight or blind eyes (Ibn Manzur 3:1827–8). The most likely explanation is that the name indicates that al-Zarqa was a blue-eyed woman. It may also be that, because of the rarity of blue eyes in Arabia, a person born blue-eyed was thought to possess some unusual powers, or to be able to see differently from other people—hence the link between blue eyes and strong eyesight. Biologically there is no connection between the color of the eye and sight, but it seems that the rarity may have given it this aura. This may indicate how a *kahina* would be created. Similarly, the renowned Zarqa al-Yamama was another legendary personality with strong eyesight that allowed her to see an army on its way to her town of Jaw (later named al-Yamama after her) in central Arabia, three days before their arrival. Unfortunately, Zarqa was not believed; her people, the tribe of Jadis, were massacred and she lost her eyes (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbuh 3:71; al-Mas’udi 2:140–1).

Khawarij

The region of Hajar and Bahrain embraced Islam in 8 AH (630 CE) and the first mosque outside Medina to gather people for the Friday prayer was the Jiwatha mosque, near al-Hufuf in inland eastern Arabia. The Christian tribe of ‘Abd al-Qays was the principal tribe residing there that embraced Islam and then resisted the apostate *ridda* uprising against the Islamic state, which took place after the death of the Prophet in 11AH (632 CE). In the following centuries, Hajar and Bahrain continued to be important regions economically, but they experienced religious and political unrest and social revolts because of the Umayyad policy of using one of the main towns, al-Zara, west of Qatif, and Oman, as exile regions (al-Mulla 1: 181). For example, they took part in the fanatical Azariqa-Khawarij movement, which originated after 64 AH/686 CE in central Arabia, most of whose followers were from the tribe of Tamim in the region of al-Yamama. The Tamim expanded into eastern Arabia and so did the Khawarij movement, which lasted until the mid-second century AH/eighth century CE. Some of them moved to Basra in Iraq, where they fought for a long time and then withdrew to al-Ahwaz and then to Makran in Persia (Majid 135ff.). The major Khawarij ruler in al-Yamama in 65 AH/687 CE, Najda al-Hanafi, extended his rule over half of Arabia, including eastern Arabia and Hajar. It is suggested that another leader of the Khawarij, Qatari ibn al-Fuja‘a originated in present-day Qatar—hence his name—took the lead after Najda died. He was called Prince of the Believers and ruled over the Azariqa for more than ten years.

In the Khawarij movement, however strict it was in terms of religious doctrine, women were very active in both war and peace. Although the roles these women played were outstanding, reference to them is traced with difficulty in historical annals. Most of the leaders’ wives joined in the battles they were waging against the Umayyads and later the Abbasids. They also allowed women to lead the prayers and to be political leaders. We may note Ghazala, the wife of Shabib al-Khariji, one of the Khawarij’s main leaders in 76–77 AH/695 CE. She entered Kufa in her husband’s absence and went to the main mosque, challenging the merciless governor of Iraq, al-Hajjaj (75–95 AH/ 694–713 CE), where she preached the sermon and then led the morning prayer (al-Baghdadi 113; al-Ikri al-Hanbali 1:83). She also fought with him in battle, when she was killed and her head

was brought to al-Hajjaj. Ghazala was a very distinguished personality but it is not relevant to elaborate on this here. Shabib's mother, Juhayza, was also killed in the same battle, fighting alongside his men.¹¹ Al-Tabari relates that in Qatari's last battle before his death 'fifteen beautiful and strong women were fighting and defending him side by side. It was not clear what relationship these women had to the Khawariji leader' (al-Tabari 3: 606). The only woman's name that has come down to us is Umm Hakim bint 'Amr, who was brave, beautiful, pious, and eloquent, but her relationship to Qatari was not known (Qassab 299). Another of the fifteen women who stood in Qatari's defense, was an elderly woman who attacked one of the Umayyad leaders; bewildered, he told the story of how he had to kill her in self-defense, as she was so unexpectedly strong and her sword reached him so that he found himself retaliating and killed her (Qassab 300). Qatari bin al-Fuja'a died in a battle in 77 AH/696 CE (ibid. 296–7).

From greater Bahrain, an uprising was led by al-Rayyan al-Nukari during al-Hajjaj's governorship in Iraq. It is said that in the year 79 AH/698 CE al-Rayyan rose against al-Hajjaj in a town called Tab in al-Khat, on the coast of Arabia that includes present-day eastern Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. He found allies in the Khawarij of Oman and won the town that year. By the following year, al-Hajjaj's troops reached Bahrain and fought al-Rayyan, who was accompanied this time by a woman called Jayda from the al-Azd tribe. They were both killed, but the uprising continued (Ibn Khayyat 1: 278–9). Not much is said about Jayda or her relationship to al-Rayyan, but the general tone indicates that she was a participant in battle on an equal standing. It is possible that she was his wife, as we have seen several cases of Khawarij wives taking part in battles beside their husbands.

In Bahrain again, a few years later, there was Zaynab, sister of Mas'ud al-Muaribi the Khawariji, who fought with her brother in the battle of al-Yamama. Mas'ud rose against the Umayyads in 86 AH/705 CE in Bahrain and ruled it, then went to al-Yamama to fight but lost the battle and he and his sister were both killed (al-Mulla 2: 80; Ibn al-Athir 4: 366).

¹¹Imran bin Hattan, a poet and a Khawarij fighter, recited a strongly-worded poem in her praise of al-Hajjaj's satire: 'A lion on me and an ostrich in war. Would you face Ghazala in battle, instead, your heart is in a bird's wings' (al-Asfahani 20: 314). (Showing the humiliation of mighty al-Hajjaj in front of the Khawariji woman is remarkable in the context of the power relationship between the Umayyads and the rest. It gives a glimpse into the position of women within Khariji society.)

It is interesting to note that her brother Mas‘ud was called Mas‘ud son of Abu Zaynab (Zaynab’s father), i.e. both her father and her brother were identified in relation to her, a significant sign of the high status given to Zaynab and probably to women in general in that environment.

Another dramatic Khawariji personality was al-Bathja of the Yarbu‘ tribe, who used to criticize Ziyad ibn Abih of the Umayyads (44–53 AH/664–672 CE) for his corruption and fought against him in Mecca. When the battle was lost and she was killed, he had her stripped and cut off her hands and feet and hung them up in the market (Ibn al-Athir 3: 517). The barbaric retaliation to this revolt is significant and telling. How influential and strong was she? Why would a woman threaten one of the Umayyad’s most brutal governors? She was an example of a Khawariji woman with faith and will stronger than any torture. Many questions arise as to what motivated such women to resist so forcefully.

Al-Qaramita

In the third century AH/tenth century CE, the east of Arabia was the focus of a social reform movement named after al-Qaramita (286–378 AH/899–988 CE). In the view of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the Sunni community, this was a heretical movement and is reported as such in the historical records. It resisted the Abbasids for about a century and made some outrageous attacks on pilgrims and on Mecca and the Holy Mosque itself, killing and burning then removing the black stone from the corner of the Ka‘ba in 317 AH/929 CE and taking it to Hajar. Touching this sacred part of the Ka‘ba was shocking to the Muslim world, but the black stone nevertheless remained for twenty-three years in Hajar, where the Qaramita established a community based on equality, sharing and a gentle religion (Abu ‘Izza 213–5).

As with the Khawarij, the women in this community played an important role from the beginning, including accompanying the fighters into battle (al-Tabari 5: 666). Within the social structure established by the founder, Hamdan Qurmut, every member contributed to the welfare of the group in what was called *nizam al-ulfa* (the system of harmony). Women’s contribution came from their income from spinning and from donations of jewelry and other belongings (al-Maqrizi 1: 46). Part of the ethos that spread through the Qaramita towns was to value women, respect them,

and acknowledge their contribution to society. A marker of the values of mutual respect was that women went unveiled. That was in resistance to the hypocrisy of the Abbassids' and religious leaders' social values and ethics (al-Laziqani 100–2). This is not the whole story, but Qaramita history was very protected and was rarely revealed in detail. In addition, many controversies and legends govern their social structure and relationships, but this must be left for a later study.

Finally, it must be realized that, in almost every society, women have commonly been regarded as symbols of honor and pride. Arabs were no exception, as their social tradition emphatically indicates. History is full of examples of battles and wars being fought in defense of women's honor. A woman's cry for help was considered to place an obligation on the whole tribe to respond, no matter what the context or the balance of power. In south-eastern Arabia, the controversial movement led by Luqayt ibn Malik al-Azdi in 11 AH/632 CE in Daba, (present-day Oman) within the apostate *ridda* movement against the Islamic state is said to have been provoked by a woman. An elderly woman from the main Azd tribe while paying her *zakat* taxes was not accepted and was treated violently by the tax collectors. She cried out, 'O People of Malik' (of Azd)—a cry recognized as being a call for the defense of her honor, and an uprising immediately broke out in response (al-Amd 106–7). It is not clear whether this story was the main reason for the Omani *ridda*, or whether it was an excuse for the Azd to use the moment of the Prophet's death to regain power over Oman. Many other examples in history show women to be called as the provokers of war or revenge, such as the story of the mother of Amr bin Kalthum, Layla bint al-Muhalhil; she called on her tribe to defend her honor, which resulted in the king, Amr ibn Hind, being killed by her son.¹² There was also the forty-year war of al-Basus (494–534 CE), named after a woman called al-Basus bint Munqith, which took place between the tribes of Bakr and Taghlib (Jad al-Mawla et al. 54). Each of these stories could be rebutted, and many of them are hard to believe, but they are continually used in the Arab imagination and have persisted in the Muslim imagination too. I believe it is interesting to look at the way in which honor is probably used to cover up other motives, such as the desire for power and authority. However, we cannot deny that the honor factor may

¹²However, many scholars do not accept the historicity of this story. Taha Husayn (219–20) is one who doubts many of the pre-Islamic heroic stories related by the poets.

also have been present and have played a role in igniting societal emotions out of respect for women.

Conclusion

It has been noted that eastern Arabia was historically distinct in many ways. First, it was considered by the ancient people of the land of the Two Rivers (Mesopotamia) to be the eternal land, Paradise, and the Garden of Eden. The main character in the presentation of this identity was the mother goddess Ninhursag. The immense number of tombs and tumuli found in Dilmun, on both the island and the mainland, are evidence of the belief in this legendary land. This remained the image of Dilmun until the historical period in the late fourth millennium BCE.

Second, it represented a special type of social structure via the matrilinearity system, as found in the late first millennium BCE. This suggests the presence of an order of priestesses who are the descendants of some kind of marital practice which was related to a cult or a religious ritual that resulted in the formation of a community of women who maintained a matrilinear affinity system that was recognized and accepted in eastern Arabia.¹³

Continuity with the mythological mother goddess may be suggested: Ninhursag extended her representation to the priestesses of the third century CE. It is not clear how long that has lasted or how far it extended. The Islamic period in eastern Arabia seems as distinctive as the pre-Islamic. It was an era when there was a free, independence-seeking spirit. It is debatable whether this was due to the alienation policy with which the caliphs, both Umayyads and Abbasids, treated the region, making it a place of exile for *persona non grata*, or whether such undesirables influenced the locals, or whether this character was inherent in the region and its people, both women and men. This independence of spirit was expressed through a number of revolts and uprisings, giving rise to independent states that were illegitimate from the Abbasid point of view.

¹³A system where priestesses were united with either the high priest/king or his representative and donated their descendants to the service of the temple. Similar practices prevailed in Babylon between the high priestess of the goddess Innana and the high priest of the Moon God. Supervising the fertility cult of sacred marriage was one of the tasks of priestesses in Mesopotamia (Frymer-Kensky 64).

They were unlike other states in that they followed a controversial social vision. Two major social groups existed in eastern Arabia or made an impression there: the short-lived Khawarij and the Qaramita state, which broke away from the Muslim community and opposed it in an extreme fashion, and were very literal in their interpretation of the sacred text and the Prophet's practice.¹⁴ This in itself has led to brutal conflict and bloodshed at various points in Islamic history. Whatever may be thought of the Khawarij and the Qaramita themselves, women among them played an important role, showing courage and commitment to their beliefs.

Women in ancient or Islamic eastern Arabia had a distinctive character that was perhaps particular to that region. Is it the periphery psychology, or isolation from the center of political decision, or, possibly, their constant contact with the outside world from ancient times, or may all of these factors together have formed the identity of the eastern Arabian woman? More research is needed and the articles that follow will doubtless make a substantial contribution.

¹⁴There was a third movement, the Zinj, which was a slave uprising. There is no report of women playing a part in this revolt.